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Source: *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 10, No. 1/2, Special Issue: American Folklore Historiography (Jun. - Aug., 1973), pp. 113-124
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813884
Accessed: 22/06/2014 14:19

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A History of Folklore Studies — Why Do We Need It?

To paraphrase William James, a new theory has three stages: first it is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen as indeed important, but not new at all.[1] Then both its adversaries and champions regard it as an integral part of the history of ideas and diligently trace the geneaology of its intellectual ancestors and philosophical kin. The new surge of interest in the history of folklore studies attests that at long last our discipline has reached this third developmental stage.[2] If nobody else does so, at least students of folklore claim an intellectual and scholarly tradition for their discipline

[1] My paraphrase does not match the wit and wisdom of the original text, the last sentence of which reads: "Finally it is seen so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it." William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), p. 198.

[2] See Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Dag Stromback, ed., *Leading Folklorists of the North: Biographical Studies* (Oslo: Universitetsfolaget, 1971). Also, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 65: 1 (1969) is devoted to essays related to the history of folklore scholarship in European countries and in the United States. An even clearer index of this strong interest in the history of the discipline is the number of dissertations completed or in progress written on the subject. Recently submitted are: Richard A. Reuss, "American Folklore and Left-Wing Politics 1927-57" (Indiana University, 1971); Francis Anthony de Caro, "Folklore as an "Historical Science": The Anglo-American View Point" (Indiana University, 1972); and Harry A. Senn, "Folklore Scholarship in France" (University of California, 1972). At the University of Pennsylvania, M. Carole Henderson and Linda Morely, both participants in this panel, are working on the history of folklore scholarship in Canada, and the biography of Francis J. Child, respectively. In addition, Susan Dwyer Schick is writing her dissertation about the anthropological school in folklore research in the United States, and at Indiana University, William K. McNeil is researching the history of folklore in the United States, 1888-1907.

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that sanctions its scientific identity and confirms its position in academe.

However, aside from fulfilling this need (which is no less psychological than scholarly), the inevitable question still lingers: "Why Do We Need A History of Folklore?" Why should we expose past debates, forgotten failures, and wished-to-be-forgotten errors, and air them in print again, particularly when the present tasks of folklore research are rapidly mounting and there are never enough of us to shoulder them?

No doubt, it would be simplest to dismiss this question with the mountain climber's answer: "Because it is there." Like the top of the mountain, the history of folklore exists, covered with the clouds of time, awesome, looming from a growing distance. The discovery of facts and the penetrating scrutiny of the past could be a challenge to the scholar like the conquest of the peak and the view from the top are to mountain climbers. But such an answer reveals the possible hidden shortcomings of historical research rather than expounds its value. The examination of the history of folklore might provide simply a new outlet for the obsession with collecting, for which our profession is reputed and ridiculed.[3] It could divert the energy of enterprising folklorists from collecting tales, songs, proverbs, and log cabins to the gathering of historical facts. Tediously and laboriously, we would unveil whatever our predecessors tried to conceal, peep into their drawers of correspondence, and collect and classify the facts about past collecting and classifying. By merely transferring earlier methods in folklore research into this newly emerging subject, folklorists could easily fall into the trap of the "chronic fallacy,"[4] listing facts that relate to each other only in calendaric succession. The resulting narrative would be a chronicle but not a history of folklore.[5]

After all, folklore scholarship did not succeed, in many respects, in avoiding the pitfalls of method that are analogous to mere chronicling. The accumulations of texts and the construction of indexes have proven

[3] See Alan Dundes, "On the Psychology of Collecting Folklore," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 28 (1962): 65-74.

[4] David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 152.

[5] The distinction between chronicle and history has been discussed at length in historical writings. See for example, Benedetto Croce, *History – Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1921), pp. 11-26; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: The Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 202-203; Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 222-270; Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965), pp. 112-142.

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us able chroniclers, not historians, of oral tradition. We organize our data according to an arbitrary thematic system that has often nothing to do with the inherent relationships between themes and motifs in the texts themselves. Thompson's statement of purpose is the best testimony regarding the nature of his monumental index. He says:

> As a method in folklore, motif-indexing is merely spadework for future research. It is hardly research itself. We are not studying any one of the motifs that are being listed. *The work has the same relation to future folklore research as a dictionary has to the writer of literature, or the map to the explorer who needs to keep his bearing*[6] [my italics].

Yet, while chronology has been condemned as unfit for the presentation, explanation, and analysis of history, the very equivalent of this method in folklore has long been thought to be one of the cornerstones of scholarship. The formative years of folklore have been devoted to the construction of research tools such as classification systems, indexes, bibliographies, and annotated collections. These were designed to enable the folklorist to be professional, and at the same time to guard his subject matter from other scholars from all walks of academe, who raided it for their own purposes. But the consuming concern with techniques and instruments resulted in the inevitable neglect of the theories and philosophical issues that originally generated interest in folklore. Consequently, folklore has become a craft, not a science.

Symptomatically, when in a new textbook Dorson wishes to identify the features that set the folklorist apart from "the anthropologist, the historian, the literary critic, the sociologist, the psychologist, and the political scientist," he discusses the folklorist's *skills*: fieldwork, the use of museums, and the uses of indexes.[7] This is particularly revealing since Dorson sets out to discuss not so much the techniques as the theories of the discipline. The title of the paper "Current Folklore Theories,"[8] which is an earlier version of his introduction to the volume of *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, clearly indicates this intention. However, it soon becomes apparent that while the theories of folklore are all borrowed from other disciplines, the techniques are all its own. In fact, in the

[6] Stith Thompson, *Narrative Motif-Analysis as a Folklore Method*, FFC 161 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1955), p. 9.

[7] See Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 5-7.

[8] *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 93-112.

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earlier version of the essay, Dorson identifies some of the theories by the name of the discipline from which they are derived such as "Anthropological Theory," and "Psychological Theory," the others – "Comparative Folklore Theories," "National Folklore Theories," and "Structural Folklore Theories" – are closely associated with fields such as history, political science, and linguistics and literature even if not so named in the title. In the later version of the essay that also incorporates more recent folklore scholarship, Dorson names the theories according to the methods they employ, such as "historical-geographical," the purpose they serve as "historical reconstruction," or the external use to which they are put, as for example "ideological." The ability to neglect the previous conception of folklore theories and to embrace a newer view of them, may in itself reflect the maturation process of folklore as a discipline. However, folklorists, and apparently Dorson among them, hardly recognize the new phase to which they themselves have brought the field of folklore. They continue, inadvertently, to condemn their chosen field of study by emphasizing its technical aspects, rather than discussing its salient ideas and unique theoretical problems. On another occasion, instead of defining folklore, Dorson proposes that

> we may do better defining the folklorist, and then say that what he studies is folklore. Our premise is that he possesses a set of skills setting him apart from his departmental neighbors in literatures and languages, anthropology, linguistics, history and sociology. No one of these skills may be unique but in totality they do describe the *Gestalt* of a particular kind of scholar.[9]

The emphasis on craftsmanship, rather than ideas and theories, which underlies our own teaching, became apparent to me also in our own program at the University of Pennsylvania. On several occasions I have tried to include in the Ph.D. qualifying examinations questions about the aims of folklore studies and their relationships to the general understanding of human nature and social conduct. The questions were rejected every single time either by my chairman, who excluded them from the examination, finding them too obscure, or by my students who simply avoided them.

The intellectual double bind of mastering research tools with no applicable theoretical issues, yields frustration, dissatisfaction and an

[9] Richard M. Dorson, "The Techniques of the Folklorist," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 11 (1968): 2, reprinted in *Folklore: Selected Essays*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 12.

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enormous academic inferiority complex. The attitude of students of folklore toward other disciplines clearly demonstrates this. More than any other group of scholars, folklorists advocate and practice interdisciplinary work. They search for ideas, issues, and theoretical frameworks in anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, cultural geography, and other social science and humanistic studies. Certainly, the trend toward the breaking down of barriers between disciplines is commendable; however, when it involves only one-sided action, it is a symptom of a low status in the university and not a reflection of liberal scholarly tendencies. A measure for the prestige of academic fields could be made, as Uriel G. Foa suggests, by analyzing "the frequency with which scientists in one discipline quote papers from other disciplines, and relate these findings to the relative status of the discipline involved."[10] My impression is that folklorists would be likely to quote publications in other fields the most, and to be quoted by scholars from these disciplines the least.

The awareness of the low status of folklore among other disciplines results in a tendency to look for scapegoats to blame for this frustrating situation. The most prominent among these is none other than the elusive, allegedly undefinable name of our discipline: folklore. On this very point a friend wrote me recently, expressing what seems to me a general feeling that is discussed but rarely written down:

> Folkloristics, unlike semiotics today (or linguistics twenty years ago) is not emerging; it has emerged; and folkloristics, unlike semiotics or linguistics, is not likely to attract financial backers on the basis of the "charisma" or connotations of the word *folkloristics* (or *folklore studies* or even *folklore and mythology studies*) alone.[11]

Finding faults with the term is like blaming the dress when it is the bride who is actually ugly. Linguistics or semiotics, fashionable as the terms might be, address themselves to subjects and issues that have long occupied human thought. If we are to develop folklore from craft to science, a change of name could be at most likened to the magical practices that we study. This would not suffice. We must infuse our discipline with ideas, be able to pose problems in general terms and seek solutions on the basis of research. The need for such a change in the course of our studies and the conception of our discipline is particularly

[10] Lee Thayer, *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives* (Washington: Spartan Books, 1967), p. 149.
[11] Letter of October 8, 1972.

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urgent now, in the postinstrumentalization era of folklore; yet in order to regenerate folklore research we have to reach no further than the pre-instrumentalization stage of the discipline, examining the ideas that initially gave rise to the interest in folklore.

The roots of folklore studies reside in the fertile ground of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century's thought and art; some extend back in time even further. Romanticism and nationalism, the literary and political movements with which folklore is commonly associated, were but the last phases in its emergence. The Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin observes correctly, "The narrow concept of popular character and folklore was born in the pre-Romantic period and was basically completed by von Herder and the Romantics."[12] Although the speculative solutions of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment philosophers need no revival at present, the fundamental questions they posed about the nature of belief and history, language and the imagination, man, nature and society, are crucial to our inquiry today. The challenge they provide to folklore studies should be met with modern concepts, methods, and theoretical formulations. The study of the history of folklore would then restore to the discipline the perspective of ideas we lost in developing the tools for research.

Of course, the epoch that began with the Brothers Grimm's recording of tales from oral tradition and ended with Thompson's monumental indexing of these and other available texts, was not unified. The students of folklore during that era had their share of ideas and theories, but the emphasis of scholarship was upon creating tools for folklore. Now that the tools exist, there is again a demand and a desire among folklorists to meet the challenge of ideas and to reexamine established premises. The study of the history of folklore studies could extend the range of theoretical issues with which we deal well beyond the formative years into the preparadigmatic period of the discipline, and bring into modern studies problems we sidetracked because of the concern with techniques. It also could lift folklore as a discipline from the position of academic marginality and relocate it in the midst of the main core of the intellectual discourse about the nature of man.

Some folklorists have sought other means to achieve this last goal.

[12] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 4.

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The current interest in applied folklore[13] is nothing but an honest attempt to make our research relevant to the urgent social issues of today, to find practical ends for theoretical investigation. Thus, if applied folklore relates our studies to the needs of society, the quest into the history of folklore reestablishes the ties between our discipline and the major ideas of men about man.

But the history of folklore does not only fulfill present needs. It is a subject of study in and of itself. The complex social relationships between the students of folklore and their subjects, the intersection of different disciplines, and popular and political movements in our field, constitute a still hardly explored chapter in the history of science. The solution to the deceptively simple problem "who studies whom," becomes a complex narrative when there is an account for the historical variables of period, country, and ethnic groups. The impression that the biographies of the Grimm brothers and the history of British folklore yield is that folklore is basically "intellectual slumming"; the middle and upper class people study those whom they regard socially inferior.[14] The motivation that initiates these social relationships is not necessarily related to class-consciousness or to a derogatory attitude toward the subjects of research. On many occasions, because of the romantic-nationalistic premises upon which folklore research is founded, scholars express adulation for the simple, unsophisticated narrators and singers. But by and large, in that area we lack details and cannot yet establish general patterns of behavior examining the social relations and attitudes of folklorists to their informants. So far we have at our disposal anecdotal information, and in such cases the exception rather than the rule stands out, as for example a second-generation Jewish immigrant from Brooklyn who studies not his own culture, but that of the Scottish poor. The sociology of our own discipline has, thus, an historical dimension. Its exploration has direct bearing upon the ideas and theories we formulate because in many

[13] See Dick Sweterlitsch, ed., *Papers on Applied Folklore*, (= *Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Series*, no. 8) (Bloomington, Ind., 1971).

[14] Gunhild Ginschel, *Der junge Jacob Grimm 1805-1819*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Veroffentlichungen der Sprachwissenschaftlichen Kommission 7 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967); Ruth Michaelis-Jena, *The Brothers Grimm* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Murray B. Peppard, *Paths Through the Forest: A Biography of the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

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cases, these are direct consequences of research situations and field experiences.[15]

The social interaction between the student and his subject is but a single parameter of relations; we cannot, and should not, conceive of the activity of the researcher in terms of the class structure of a society. Academic disciplines and traditions have affected our approaches to the study of folklore, and constitute a changing network of relationships that deserve study as well. The papers of this panel have direct bearing upon this aspect of the history of folklore and they reflect some of the major developments in the field in the United States. Naturally they do not represent all the formative trends in the early days of folklore scholarship. Missing, for example, are discussions of the activities in the recording and study of folklore along ethnic, regional, and occupational boundaries. The impressive quantity of folklore publications that followed the Federal Writers' Project involvement in recording oral traditions has affected the course of folklore as an academic discipline, and both directly and indirectly shaped the interests of many American folklorists.[16] Similarly, the negative and positive influence that popularization has had upon the recognition of folklore as an academic discipline deserves a fuller analysis.[17] As recent studies clearly demonstrate, folklore, perhaps to a greater extent than any other social science and humanistic discipline, is interrelated with nonacademic trends of thought and action. The ideas of Herder that initially stimulated folklore research in Europe and affected the literary awareness of "the folk" in America, in modern times were transformed into ideologies of political movements on the right and the left.[18] The complex historical relations between social

[15] On this problem in anthropology, see Dennison Nash and Ronald Wintrob, "The Emergence of Self-Consciousness in Ethnography," *Current Anthropology* 13 (1972): 527-542, and the bibliography appended to the essay.

[16] See Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), pp. 265-285; Benjamin A. Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research: 'Bread and Song'," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1939): 7-14; and Benjamin A. Botkin, "Living Lore on the New York City Writers' Project," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 2 (1946): 252-263.

[17] The popular image of folklore had a direct effect upon the development of folklore at the universities since funds allocated through the National Defense Education Act were later withdrawn. See Richard M. Dorson, "Folklore and the National Defense Education Act," *Journal of American Folklore* 75 (1962): 160-164.

[18] See Richard A. Reuss, "American Folklore and Left-Wing Politics 1927-57"; R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (Bowling Green:

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propaganda and methodological research should be faced and thoroughly analyzed in historical terms.

M. Carole Henderson touches upon this problem in the Canadian context. She aptly demonstrates that folklore studies constitute an open system, which is susceptible to the influence of social and political events. The folklore paradigm[19] should be examined within the larger social context of scientific research.

Yet, most of the papers in this panel revolve around the very process of paradigm formation in folklore; that is, they narrate the attempts to lay the foundations for research in terms of the identification and selection of a unique subject matter, the construction of a theoretical framework, and the proposal of methodological procedures. They also describe the process of institutionalization of folklore in social and academic contexts. The significance of this last aspect of the organization of scientific activity did not escape the founding fathers of folklore in America. They well understood that control over institutions would allow them to regulate, systematize, and administrate research and publication; hence the fierce clashes of personalities that Michael Bell and Regna Darnell describe in their respective papers illustrate the conflict between scientific trends and trends of thought. Their papers tell the creation story of folklore in America, describing the battles between intellectual ancestors and demigods. But strangely enough, unlike the mythical narratives to which we are all accustomed, the defeated camp survived the battle and ended up dominating the field for many years to come.

As Bell and Darnell relate, the American Folklore Society held a central position during the struggle over the direction of research, and served as a power base for Boas and Newell, from which they conducted their respective intellectual battles. Each had his own vested interest in the Society. On the one hand, Boas fought the anthropological establishment of Boston and Washington and promoted his own theories and

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Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972); Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1972); and Wolfgang Emmerich, *Zur Kritik der Volkstümsideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971).

[9] For a discussion of the concept of paradigm in the history of science, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: The University Press, 1970), pp. 59-89.

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students through the Society.[20] On the other hand, Newell challenged the purely literary direction of the Chicago Folklore Society headed by Bassett. The combined forces of Boas and Newell left upon the American Folklore Society the imprint of anthropological theories. Thoresen shows in his paper that this orientation enabled Kroeber to carry out anthropological-folkloristic research that was at the time at the vanguard of social and scientific theory.

Like many other disciplines in the United States, folklore had not one, but two forms of institutionalization: the learned societies and the university departments and centers. Boas and Newell controlled the Society, but their ambition, particularly that of Boas, was to establish authority over university research and teaching. Indeed, in due time Boas achieved his goal in anthropology, but folklore lagged behind and only many years later gained a stronghold at the university. (Actually there is a gap of over fifty years between the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888 and the establishment of the first degree-granting program in folklore at Indiana University in 1949.[21])

Nevertheless, sporadic instruction in folklore, with differing degrees of intensity and concentration, took place at various universities throughout that period. Many of these courses, however, reflected the literary orientation that Bassett and the Chicago Folklore Society advocated, rather than the anthropological direction that Newell and Boas pursued. The support of the literary camp came from a third party, hardly involved in the battle between the societies, namely Francis J. Child, a Chaucerian who is remembered mostly because of the ballads he canonized. Most of the university courses are related directly and indirectly

[20] See George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp. 195-233.

[21] The program was announced in the section of "Folklore News," *Journal of American Folklore* 62 (1949): 193. For other descriptions of folklore studies at American universities, see Ralph Steele Boggs, "Folklore in University Curricula in the United States," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 4 (1940): 93-109, and "The Development of Folklore in a University," in *Studies in Language and Literature*, ed. George R. Coffman, University of North Carolina Sesquincentennial Publications (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1945), pp. 106-111; Richard M. Dorson, "The Growth of Folklore Courses," *Journal of American Folklore* 63 (1950): 345-59, "Folklore Studies in the United States Today," *Folklore* 62 (1951): 353-366, "The American Folklore Scene, 1963," *Folklore* 74 (1963): 433-449, and "The Academic Future of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore Supplement*, May 1972, pp. 104-25 (includes seven commentaries); and Ronald L. Baker, "Folklore Courses and Programs in American Colleges and Universities," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 221-229.

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to his teaching at Harvard at the end of the nineteenth century, and the courses offered by his disciple, George Lyman Kittredge, following in the footsteps of his teacher. As Linda Morely has suggested to our panel, Child arrived at folklore studies and ballad research through his interest in medieval English literature, and the literary approach continued to dominate the writings and teachings in folklore of both scholars. When Stith Thompson and Archer Taylor studied with Kittredge at Harvard during the second decade of the twentieth century, they continued in the tradition already established there. Their transference of scholarly allegiance to the Finnish method in folklore research presented no conflict, since the historic-geographic approach likewise was partly an outgrowth of literary interest in folklore traditions. These two scholars exerted major influence on the direction of folklore teaching at American universities and they established instruction on literary, not anthropological, foundations. Thus, while the anthropological approach remained dominant in the American Folklore Society itself for many years, it was the literary approach, heralded by Bassett and the Chicago Folklore Society, that was the dominant force at the universities. The impact of this tradition can be noticed still today, as most folklore courses are given in literature rather than anthropology departments.[22]

The struggle over the control of the centers of scholarly activities should not overshadow the role of the individual in the advancement of a discipline. It provides but a partial picture of the scholarly activity of a period, especially a preformative one. By the selection of his subject, "the contribution of Phillips Barry to folklore," Alvey is able to underscore this very point. He demonstrates the import of the rebelling, nonconformist scholar, the individual who has obligations to none and is free of responsibility to institutions and their scientific norms. Phillips Barry was able thus to explore new theories and methods, to challenge authorities, and to speculate imaginatively, thereby breaking new grounds for research.

The biographical focus of most of the papers presented here does not and should not disguise the purpose of explorations into the history of folklore studies, namely the examination of the theories and ideas that underlie the research activities in different periods of folklore scholarship. While the unfolding of a biography could easily drift into anecdotal

[22] See Baker, "Folklore Courses and Programs in American Colleges and Universities."

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narration, when properly developed it provides a description of intellectual development not as thought but as an experience.[23] A study of that genre, as the present examples illustrate, underscores the intellectual activity of the past as a human involvement, affected by the intricacies of personal interactions, the frustrations of failure, and the elation with success. These essays offer keys to the understanding of a context much larger than themselves; at the same time they constitute modalities of intellectual growth that both individually and collectively shaped the forms of folklore scholarship.

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[23] See Jacob Gruber, "In Search of Experience: Biography as an Instrument for the History of Anthropology," in *Pioneers of American Anthropology: the Uses of Biography*, ed. June Helm (= *The American Ethnological Society Monograph*, 43) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), pp. 5-27. Also see the "The Making of Modern Science: Biographical Studies," *Daedalus* 99, no. 4 (Fall, 1970).

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